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Mekong Review

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"The only immigrant discourse today is the discourse of woman."}

Marguerite Durán, 1993

I n 1993, Marguerite Durán described the women of Cambodia as "the only immigrant discourse today" in her novel "The Mother of Cambodia." Durán, a former schoolteacher, returned to Cambodia after a long exile in France, where she worked as a journalist. Her novel is a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of Cambodian women, who have endured incredible hardship and trauma in the wake of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The novel is set in the 1990s, following the life of a young Cambodian woman named Srey Neng. Srey Neng is a student at a school for orphans, where she meets and falls in love with a French teacher named Christian. Despite the cultural and linguistic differences, the two form a deep bond and eventually marry.

However, their happiness is short-lived. Christian is arrested and sent to a French military prison, where he is subjected to torture and interrogation. Srey Neng, determined to rescue her husband, embarks on a dangerous journey to Paris, where she risks her life to secure his release.

In her powerful narrative, Durán examines the complexities of identity and cultural assimilation, exploring the challenges faced by Cambodian immigrants in France. Through Srey Neng's story, Durán highlights the strength and resilience of Cambodian women, who continue to fight for their families and their country even in the face of adversity.

"The Mother of Cambodia" is a poignant and moving story that resonates with readers around the world, offering a glimpse into the lives of Cambodian women and their struggle for survival and dignity.

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Marguerite Durán, 1993

"The only immigrant discourse today is the discourse of woman."
performance I understood Khrushchev as one who had renounced power with its temptations. This last sentence hints that the story sprang as much from the Russian milieu of the Intercolonial Office of Information, where Duras worked from 1937 to 1940, as from les lieux de mémoire of her Indo-Chinese adolescence. Duras's stint as copywriter for the colonies culminated in Céline Fracina, a grandiloquent tome co-authored with Louise Fauquez, extolling France's colonial policy as a work of educational uplift and hygienic salvation that allowed natives to "keep their own language, culture, traditions" while "exploiting the riches of their country in a methodical way" for their own good, and at France's expense. Here, Duras honed her talent for fiction. The books closing lines cast France as a comrade.

Duras remembered her first day at the Ministry of Colonies as "the most important day of my youth," one that returned her to "the same old colonial shit!" Always assuming she would leave, Duras was still there at the onset of the Vichy regime. This collision with the imperial enterprise, whose corruption undid her modesty, will have fuelled the angst, memory, and venom of Duras's pen in her repeated voyages against the corrupt colonial land registry.

Duras has described The Sea Wall as a "political" novel, in which the emotion she gave free reign in later novels such as The Lover, was stymied by a Manichean lens on capitalism. The Sea Wall at once documents the abuses of the land registry, and maps for us Indochina as seen through the eyes of a "juste bleu." While the French who settled in Indochina never earned the sobriquet "juste noir" applied to settlers in Algeria, Duras's mother and brother's feet are described as caked in mud.

In The Sea Wall, the young Suzanne's world is mapped primarily through the points of Kam (Kamp), Ram (home of a small restaurant where people congregate to dance, sip Pernod, and wait for the mailboats from Siam), "la ville" (Saigon), and "la plus grande ville des colonies" (Hanoi) and Paris. Of all these place-names, Paris is at once the most accessible and the abstract and tangible cultural practices, which live in Suzanne and her brother's imagination through French gramophone records, and whose "reality" is mediated in the novel by Paris's most recent returnees, M. Jo, the son of a plantation owner from the North — gloriously depicted in Chomondoy, and he is essentially depicted in The Lover. Ramona is no longer in venue in Paris, M. Jo tells them.

Against a panoptic dreamscape, the Cambodian landscape depicted in The Sea Wall, Vice-Cornal Marguerite Durand is a cruel contemporary to colonial narratives of benevolent development. Instead of nurturing, it fattens: crabs are not food-sources but harbingers of destruction that wreck the sea-wall. Stray, rib-bare dogs scavenge on the bodies of starving children. Drowned peacocks wash up in the river mouth, and tigers prowl. Where the mythology of empire celebrates colonial roads as arteries of material and moral uplift in such works as colonial administrator George Groslier's 1925 novel La route du plus fort (The Road of the Fittest), the roads to Ram (Siam) are plied by corrupt officials, diseased women, worm-infested children and contraband. The young Suzanne, Duras's fictional alter-ego in The Sea Wall, finds escape in the live "cinema" of pigs and buffaloes, and further afield, in Saigon. Eden Cinema, whose "vast, "artificial and democratic right" clings the reality of segregated seating. Duras shares with her Indochina cohort a tendency to blur indigenous peoples with the landscape. But she breaks rank with the heroes of Groslier and Andre Malraux by dehumanizing both colonial bureaucrats (reduced to "dogs" in the heroine's invertebrate), and businesswomen who she describes as "the great vampires of the colony.

Ironically, it was Paris that shattered for Duras the illusory divide between the cinema and reality. She later claimed that her first day at work in the Ministry of Colonies had taught her "in one fell swoop what the cinema had not taught me, to know that life is not always beautiful." And in April 1945, after the fall of Berlin, when searching for her husband Robert Antelme, a poor and resistance member who had been divorced and deported to Dachau, she visited the Gaumont Cinema, now a "train center.

Still later, in the garden of the first house she bought in Paris, ugly history resurfaced in an archaeology of luxx, when she uncovered the garbage pits left by occupying German officers, containing oyster shells and empty jars of figs, grapes and caviar. Duras's successor in laying the spirit of her mother to rest any more than that of her brother, who perished in Japanese-occupied Saigon in December 1942. Bereavement permeates Duras's essay "The Death of the Young British Pilot," which compares the ritual reminderness of an English orphan in France in May 1944 with the death of her brother, who "died without any grave at all. Thrown... into a mass pit on top of the previous corpses," the theme of innumerable slaves' graves recur in Duras's work, leading, in part, to criticism being the publication of The Vice Consul in 1966 as the end of the "colonial novel," praise in which Duras delighted. "Exoticism must be killed off, French literature has created that million for long enough," she declared. This verdict was premature. While her novels laid bare the hypocrisy of colonial life, her broad-brush depictions rendered Cambodians anonymous, whether in her role as the "inhabitants of the place as the singular, as the "beggar" woman. Perhaps Cambodian authors will follow the cue set by Algerian writer Kamel Daoud in The Meursault Investigation, in which he speaks back to the colonial anti-hero of Albert Camus' The Stranger. "There I was," writes Daoud's narrator, "expecting to find my brother's last words... his feature, his nose, his answers... instead I read only two lines about an Arab..." Marie Donnadieu is also nameless in Duras's work, but she is conjured in a kinship term (albeit one affected by distance), and her character is etched with a specific history and features. Only in 1984, on publication of The Lover (and later in The North China Lover) did Duras elaborate the character of an Asian, remaining M. in this.

Duras's legacy shares with her compatriot, Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano, a skew of fences, names, and places that occur across diverse and seemingly discrete works to create an at once incaché and connected universe. Mendiondo's translator Mark Polizziotti, whose credits include two of Duras's works, has described Modiano's landscape as a "self-contrived world in which figures move and evolve but remain fundamentally similar." The same could be said of Duras.

Mendiondo was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2014 for "the art of memory," Duras's writings pivot as much on the art as on the afflatus of memory in their evocation of her own life-world and by extension, that of colonialism. Convincing gems emerge in her interviews, such as her mother's tip that the going rate for the Legion of Honor was eighty thousand francs, and that the decision was held by the "biggest crooks in Indochina," but her fusion of fact and fiction has left free-writers at a loss. As Duras told her biographer Laure Adler: The story of my life does not exist.

Luc Megnet's new book Marguerite Duras en Cambodge strives to distinguish fact, fantasy and fiction and interested in romanticizing Duras's life, focusing instead on reconstructing a particular sector of that life. I strongly encourage all Duras fans, and all those interested in understanding the different voices and visions at play in colonial Cambodia, to buy it. It is the first book to map comprehensively Duras's Cambodian experience, combining archival material, including letters. However, as the authorally and, with relevant excerpts of Duras's works, and oral histories with helpful maps.

A minor criticism is Megnet's choice of illustration. Notably of the bare-breasted Suzanne in a still from Rohith Panshin film of The Sea Wall, which continues the vein of eroticism and voyeurism with which Duras strove to break. In Panshin's elegant film, this image is embedded within a cinematographic narrative that conveys the texture and cadence of Duras's prose. Why has Megnet chosen to isolate an image that leaves little to the imagination? In The Sea Wall, the young Suzanne decides to open the door of her shower to M. Jo, before he announces that he will buy her a gramophone. It is at this critical point in the novel that Suzanne becomes a prostitute, not through vocation or decision, or even economic circumstance, but by an accident of timing. The power of Duras lies in what is left unseen or unsee: the reader experiences Suzanne's satisfaction with her own body and later M. Jo's reaction at its revelation, but never explicitly or scripturally.

The vast retrospective of Duras's corpus veers from hagiography verging on necrophilia to postcolonial irecritting her authenticity. Megnet's book, like Adler's seminal biography, is a refreshing departure from this trend. Was Duras a subaltern, or a subalterniser? Can a dead white female be allowed to speak for other voices and places? And does not? We may deconstruct or emblem Duras, sharpen our scolded scapul on her oeuvre, or put her on a pedestal, but few writers can match the beauty of her prose, and no other offers Duras's raw lens on the precarious margins of Indochina. The barrage crumbles, but the towering, ferocious monument of her mother endures.